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Bard

NIGHT SESSION ON MOUNT MERU

And the sky was admirably grey
and the assembly stood respectfully
till the bird had perched on this limb—
then they bothered him with questions
no man could know the answer to.
The birds begin. Folkways of going to work,
the car the wing, the seed I bring her
firm in my beak — she samples it,
her meed, while I hurry for another.
This life is sweet as life can be
but there is a chasm running through it,
caesura through the middle of the city
Alzette through the honeycombed green canyon
over which the city wards its peace.
No bird said that, it was the history-an,
Aimant de Saint Sernin the school-man
with hanks of paper underneath his wing
soiled with meanings, spoiled with ink,
riddled with signifiers, tweet.
Nous sommes tous des oiseaux, a bunch
of birds, even pretty Arroganta de Faussure
whose twitchy epaulets yawn semaphores
now red now white against the fresh
impasto of the springtime. Shudder

at all that green. Now look who's talking,
Sparrowfeet, Evanderthunder,
a good man falls out of the sky
with the clap of a lotus opening
till fire makes water out of air. He stands
a moment silent on the branch. Pause
is a part of the weather of our speech,
rain cloud over broken barn, a blackbird
creaks. Board and lodging for all messengers,
free soup for poetry! Free prophecy
from the bourgeoisie, translate the Book of Changes
back into primordial Chinese; bereft of images
a ship endures the lift and fall of waves,
themselves nothing but the tedious history of wet.
Aqua. Permanent wave. Old ladies like sweet ducks
endure the gallantry of hired friseurs, sad
bluing whiter what is white. Is this a drake?
Or something symbolar, quick news report
from this Hansard's of the fowls in session,
a crust thrown over the fence,
a dog born fast asleep. The moon was shining
(end of pause, he went on) and half
the wall was luminous and half was black.
We walked between, in single file the six of us,
and the guards with their rifles—less than ten
feet away on either side— did not perceive us.
A football field away we sat down in the dark

and chanted quietly our evening prayers.
The moon was still listening. Loose-limbed we walked
six months over the mountains, we made it,
mostly. Now there is nothing more to tell
but what you do. The assembly
folded its arms and wings and things and thought
(if they could think) about how little it is
they do or try to do, and they remembered
(those of them with memory) how many times
the word they spoke (if they could speak)
came back to haunt them. And each thought
the thing I said is truer than the thing I am, and wept
while the bird stared up into the sky as if the moon
—racing from right to left beyond the clouds—
were repeating its own meager lesson: well try again.
And the sun rose like a woman keeping her vow.

6 May 1993
for Charlotte

THE NUMBERS

for Charlotte

As many as we count
a few are left over—
the finches said so, bright
commoners at their station,

and leaves, little as they are, and young,
seemed to know also
this doctrine of commas,
you always have to pause

to take a breath and when you do
the numbers keep on going.
Think of the largest possible number,
then add one. Then square it, make

the result factorial, breathe and add one.
There is a strict relation, a graveyard
where the words exhaust their tyranny
and men irritated by reality can sleep

in the shadow of not paying much attention.
The ball drops in the left field alley,
the linden tree is full of leaves, new ones,
mopping up the morning light.

Can I console you for my difference, the wrong
habits, fondness for blue jays and Bellini,
winter, oh I don't know what I like any more,
less of this and more of mind. Light

distinguishes and understands all things
but is not things. After all these years
I'm still trying to deal with bread.
And doorknobs and pencils and the moon.

7 MAY 1993

WASHLINE

If the door gives way, what's left?
An incomplete question is a glottal stop,
laundry on the line taken for prayer flags
of yet one more religion, the divine
wind that hurries through our world
on bluejay wings. Interpretations.

If the word gives way, brush strokes
on a snow field, we all know
we're here, we all have the same desires,
only our pretenses differ, our few skills.
Cry of an unfamiliar bird. The smell
of clothing taken in from the line after a day
in the sun, the strange smell we call "clean."

8 May 1993

for Charlotte

Yesterday a heron over our heads
flying northeast, big, its shape
against the bright evening sky
like a goose flying backwards.
Just such a goose as had wheeled
a quarter hour back above us and around us
over the land and gone back to the river,
great circle, a tear of light in or on its right wing.

8 May 1993

A chance to get out of the sequence.
Charlotte on retreat down there and me up here.
Taming the appetites of day. Nyung-nay. A practice
of silence, both the words
spoken and the words taken in.

Call Barbara about her skin, my foot, call
the man about the essay, watch the cricket match,
admire a stream full of ducks and geese,
wonder why I'm doing what I do,

sluggish pilgrim that I am,
always on foot, with cold feet idling
to the mysteries, faithful, devout, apart.

And that's not so terrible, is it,
you have to be really whole to be so apart.

8 May 1993

Not in talking hearing
hears

 enough
green of a leaf
 with sun in it,

things are caught in each other.

9 May 1993

Brake squeal, the cars
are out for sunny Sunday
amazing the machines
responding. The organic
is pervasive. Things
take on our lives.
Sardonic sunsmile. Strange
old sycamore I've just
noticed it not far away.
Dogwood. Crabapple
blossoming too.
Amazing the machine.

9 May 1993

MAY AFTERNOON

Call of the mourning doves. Red
petals flutter on the porch.
Man sleeping on his arms
like a child at a schooldesk
tired of studying his life.

9 May 1993

A crow settles down
Like two birds landing.

9 May 1993

IF AFTER NOT SPEAKING ONE SUDDENLY
SAYS

If after not speaking one suddenly says
line uncoiling from a bale of hay
wire a natural release

into form

for speech arises from Chaos
into form
and it behooves the mind
to apprehend
the form disclosed

(whereas prefabricated forms
conceal —as many cultures mean them to—
the precise forming / formal
impulses of the speaking heart

the “I” we look so hard for and
value high).

That's what I learned from not talking
for a day.

—But you knew that already, you're always saying it.

Yes, but now I *know* it. And I learned other things besides.

—Name one.

The taste of my own mouth unpersuaded by food or drink.

—You learned that from silence?

It was silence both ways, in and out. A fast silence.

—What else did you learn?

To let questions answer themselves.

10 May 1993
after nyin-ne
& for Charlotte

The wide open door onto the Kansas
corn field abruptly fills with ocean.
Art is at hand. I touch her
skin and murmur about oils.
She is pleased and lets a
squirrel run up a tree and disappear.

10 May 1993

THE PERILS OF FAIR WEATHER

sunshine disease, pink-feather
among waterfowl, the perils
of engaging in the elements
other than your own

what is your own? what is the condition
for which he was meant to be?
diseases of the atmosphere
for those inside the world
imaginary solutions to real problems
promised by revolution after revolution

remorseless sunrise

this is the alchemies
a work to be done
whereas it is his wish
to play undisturbed among the elements
tracing each to its licit junctions
then prompting alternate or forbidden unions
out to the boundaries of the actual and beyond
argon and krypton and the rest of them
dazzling strip-joints of North Beach
with sudden reminiscences of

home. What is his own? Lawn glider.
The boy in the basement
studying the elements before him
piece by piece the flavor and the feel
the molecular arrangements of infinity
while mother stretches organdy curtains
upstairs on rickety softwood frames
studded with nails to hold the fabric taut

crucifixions everywhere

and in the unused coal bin his bunsen burner coaxes
miracles of guesswork from his dazzled mind—
nothing but sludge in the beaker, his head
full of pure lands and sensuous monarchies and
geese flying immeasurably high across the zenith
while their throaty voices sound sound sound
closer than heart beats down here

argot of the wise

cheap books pretending paradise.
A good deal of vanity, orange-sticks for fingernails,
pearl-handled whatsises from mother's dresser
a paragraph from Plutarch
how Mark Anthony wore his tunic belted low

we piece the world together, barrenness
of neighborhoods, the pilgrimage
to libraries, finding the books that measure us,
finding the entitlements of this open world

prairie of cities! grasslands of desire!
limitless in front of him
the bus-bisected Paradise outstretched!

the devotion of the alchemist
is not limited by his first success,
subsequent adventures in the bathroom of the planet
constantly recruiting new substance to ennoble,
raise the ante in weird partnership
flesh and matter so unlike, mind and history so unlike,
fire and water mingle to make come
a philosophic house plant ghost of those haughty palms
lined the avenue of sphinxes
to the pointed hump of bread that fed the world
the Pyramid of mind

light-free in dim cellars, the hope of Man.

Argot tender at tongue-tip
there has to be someone who understands
he thought at the mid-point of his presuming

but by the time the first crystals formed
iridescent on the crucible's icy sides
he knew his magic fire could elicit
all animates but brotherhood alone,

argot needs another thief
to lip it back
from mouth to ear in delicate chains of influence
golden shimmer of self-persuasion

listen to the glamour of the names!

portable essences! argot needs a friend to talk to
a co-conspirator hidden with you in the hedge
hip to hip and whispering close
feeling the damp earth press in against your skin
its all-purpose commentary
argot needs the dark and dark needs you!
carbon needs its oxygen

item, someone who could answer back.

Never found. Loneliness of demiurges.
In their Cuttyhunks alone with Ariels
and other half-created spirits tight-constrained
they endure the silence of what has been made.
Whereas in Paris even churches talk,

go to Paris, go back to subways and the Mystery,

argot embedded in the common speech,
deliverly extract and cohobate
until the plausible decencies of written dialect
inherited his gold and dust and coal and happiness,

for he was joyful at his given work
joyful at the hurtless transforms!
A car among chariots, ox among sheep!
He conceived himself afresh
got born again into his persuasion
into the Sect of Saying entered
drenched in continuous baptisms!

this is the true story it all becomes the mind

what we ever were we are still are
and he continues in the cellar room
studying the heroics of the elements, studying
the great ones who came before us
their deeds and liberations
(what do we need but chemists and biographers?)

and he is always the figure at the dawn you see
slouching disconsolate towards subways entrances
full of the lush futility of the life-giving quest

and he is beside you in the shopping mall
measuring the public value of all common things
to recompute them into emeralds
deep in the hidden palaces
from which his daunted Lancelot creeps out
chipmunk-bold to nibble at the facts again
then back into the glory story for quick repair

for the hidden animates the visible

and the timid alchemist permits the sun "to shine"
its near-perfect transmutations
conferring light on good and bad alike
because he never wanted less than everything

that little villain caught with a candle in his fist
and a book in the other and the world
on fire with false ideas and only he it seemed
born empowered with the truth, strong
only with motivation to make clear, the truth
was guessing hard and hoping words were true
and rushing out into the lilac-scented morning
sleepless and book-empowered to chant
suppositious mantras to the tolerant daylight

argot of the wise so silent says

and here the rhododendron comes in, and the crow
cruising by for offerings, the world is wild
with his own silences publicly declared

silenter and silenter the way goats browse

among stone ruins the leaf fall of sunlight
intolerable afternoons
knowing something that lasts only as long as it takes to say
then the knowing's gone and the saying lasts
and twenty years later comes back to appall
the silent woman at his side

the word was supposed to vanish into its effect
the word was to be magic
was to speak the world completely into place
and then be unreadable therein,

unrecoverable word that spoke all things!

he hoped, and the cellar filled with Chinese ghosts
and Greek minor-league divinities, the comely limbs
of naked grammar turned
smiling to show themselves to him verb by verb
the world he wanted spoke itself inside him
and he thought it was no more than
opening his lips and answering

it all is answering

squirming like the veins of marble in an ancient vase.
To be known for talking in a silent world!
To babble argot among the uninitiated
to spend his chemicals and get not much gold
around him in his cellar room, light he sees
is coming through the shallow window at his back, sea-light
coming through the peach-trees, a neighbor's cock
begins to speak a better language, he snaps
the light off on his writing table

heat of the lamp
he closes his eyes and wonders what the day will bring
will it be a name to speak to him
a person able?

the silence of the earth is to be endured forever

he stands in the yard and knows that now
while the first bus of the day roars up Crescent from the sea
he has peach gum on his fingers now
as if he had touched something waking in his sleep.

11 May 1993
for Charlotte

